

The Presser



Two or three years after the first jubilee of Queen Victoria a small ten-year-old boy might have been seen slouching early every morning along the Mile End Road towards the streets of Whitechapel. Johnny Flynn was a pale boy of pinched appearance—for although his black coat was a size too large for him, his black trousers were a size too small—he was not very well, and he was tired. Plodding along from his aunt's house miles away in Hackney, he sometimes drowsily ran into things: things like sauntering policemen (who were ductile and kind) or letter-boxes (that were not). A policeman genially shook him.

'Ay! Where ye going?'

'Going to work, sir.'

'Work! What work do ye work at?'

'Mr Alabaster's, a tailor, sir.'

'O, a tailor! Mind he don't put ye under a thimble and suffocate ye. Get along with it, and don't go knocking people down's if ye was popping off to Buckingham Palace!'

Johnny wanly smiled as he said, 'No,' and 'Good morning, sir.'

It was generally a letter-box, though, and after such a mishap one day he had gone into a public lavatory. There he had seen a bad word chalked up on the wall—a very

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bad word. Johnny Flynn knew all about bad words although he had never uttered them, his mind shrank from them as a snail shrinks when you spit on it. But this time he went on his way with the bad word chanting in his mind — he could *not* but listen to it, he was absorbed by it; and the very next letter-box he came to he said it out boldly and loud, seven times, to the letter-box. And one day he dropped his packet of dinner into the mouth of one of these letter-boxes.

Well, when he came to Whitechapel there was Leman Street, and off Leman Street there were other streets full of shops with funny names over the windows, like Greenbaum, Goldansky, Finesilver and Artzibashev, and shops full of foreign food that looked nasty and smelled, or full of objects that seemed vaguely improper. There were hundreds of clattering carts bedazing him, and women who were drunk at eight o'clock in the morning sat on door-steps with their heads in their hands. And they smelled, too. Very soon now he reached a high dull building that hoarded a barracks of prolific Jewish families, and ascending one flight of its sticky stone stairs he came to a standstill outside a door in a dark passage. There he had to wait until Mr Sulky, who was the presser and had the key, arrived. Mr Sulky was a big dark young man with a pale pitted face, who lodged in an eating house, went for long walks on Sundays, and passed for a misogynist. The rest of his time he spent in pressing trousers with a large hot-iron goose.

Johnny said, 'Good morning, sir.'

Mr Sulky said, 'Huh!' but he always said it with a faint smile.

The first business in the tailor's workshop was to light the fire, a great fire maintained with coke. Then, to sweep the room clean of its countless fragments of cloth and cotton. Heaping these in a wooden box, the boy staggered

with it across the dark passage into a smaller apartment with a window, the very symbol of gloom, looking down into a dank yard where he could see people all day long going to the privy. The room contained only a colossal pile of cloth clippings covering the whole floor, and it was his unending task to sort these into their various kinds. The pile never lessened, it seemed to grow with absorbent inexorable growth. Sometimes he could scarcely enter the door to get into the room, and that implacable mountain of rags was watered with the tears of his childish hungers and despairs. He emptied the box and returned to the workshop.

Eight or nine women came in and began their work of making trousers. A massive table stood in the middle; the women sat round three sides of the room on old empty boxes—these were less comfortable than chairs, but more convenient. The room was large and well lighted from two windows. In summer the windows were a blessing to the women, the hot fire an affliction, in winter it was otherwise. Sometimes they sweated, and sometimes they sneezed or they coughed, but they never shivered. Each woman had a pad of needles tacked to her bodice, a pair of scissors and skeins of thread in her lap, and her hands were busied with the garments of men she knew nothing about. Each had a wedding ring on her nuptial finger, the beginnings of a hump on her shoulders, and the deuce knows what emotions in her heart. They were mostly young women, but they looked old, whereas Mr Sulky and Mr Alabaster were young and looked young. It reminded Johnny of the question propounded by a famous advertisement:

Why does a woman look old
sooner than
a man?

And the answer was something to do with soap.

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His favourite was certainly Helen, she was handsomest. Johnny liked her, she had a pretty freckled face and a big bosom, and was tall and fair. Johnny admired her, though she was not kind to him and effusive like old Mrs Grainger. Indeed she was in some ways, he thought, rather unkind and slightly haughty, but her smile was lovely. She was married to a bottle-washer named Smithers, and they had a little girl Hetty, six or seven years old, with weak eyes and heavy boots, who often came and sat on the stairs waiting for her mother. Mrs Grainger was a wrinkled crone who got drunk on Saturday nights in order to import cheer into her fading hours. Beer, she declared, was better than hot soup in her belly. When Johnny first came to work with them she catechized him.

'You're a weeny little chap. What's your age?'

Her hands were shiny and lumpy, she was thin, but she had a plump behind.

'I'm ten years,' replied the flustered boy.

'God's my mercy! You ought to be at school, your age. Why don't you go to school?'

'I'm not well,' said Johnny.

'Nobody's well in this world. We're all alike.' The old woman hawked and spat into her snuffy handkerchief.

'What's the matter with you?'

'I don't know,' Johnny Flynn confessed.

'How d'ye know you're not well then?'

'I can feel,' said Johnny.

'What can you feel?'

'In my liver,' the boy whispered. 'Inch and half lower than it ought to be, and we can't alter it. My mother's a widow.'

'So your father's dead?'

'Yes; she lives in the country.'

'And where do you live?'

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'With my aunt and my uncle. Down at Hackney. He's an engine-driver.'

'That's grand! D'ye like it?'

The boy reflected. 'I don't know,' he said slowly.

'Well, God's my mercy!' tittered the old woman. 'You must go out in the fresh air all you can.'

In the corner a girl sat machining seams. Mr Sulky took a hot goose from the fire to the table and pressed trousers under a damp rag that soon rotted the air with the odour of steaming cloth. This was a necessary evil, for although all the others were engaged in cutting out, preparing, stitching, binding, button-holing, and generally compounding trousers, the art of finishing the garment lay with the presser, the prince of a tailor's workshop—and that was Mr Sulky. No civilian, from a bookbinder to a bishop, would dream of donning a pair of trousers that had not been pressed. A Hottentot might, or a skipjack—yes, conceivably even a bookbinder might—but certainly not a bishop. Let it have buttons of gold, fabulous fabric, silky seams, and trimmings of rapture, fused in a noble equilibrium of cut, but until it has been baptized with a wet rag and punched with a hot iron it is nothing.

Mr Sulky (who passed for a misogynist) whistled airily as he bumped and hissed with his iron, and then began to chaff the women.

'Well, ladies!'

Heavy scarlet lips gave him the pout of a sardonic man, but his face was a kind face, very pale and very bare. Not a hair or the sign of it was to be seen on his chin. Or on his arms. At work he cast off his coat, waistcoat and collar, and wore only a striped shirt and a belt round his trousers. He kept on his neat buttoned boots, turned up his stiff cuffs, and his cuff-links tinkled as he jerked his arms.

'What devilry have you all been at since yesterday?'

The ladies glanced at each other, and tittered.

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'Nothing, Ernie, so help me God,' cackled Mrs Grainger. 'Ask Helen.'

'Bah!' The presser clouted his goose down upon some innocent trousers.

'O dear, ladies,' cried the provoking old woman, 'he's got a wink over his eye this morning.'

Mr Sulky, somewhat baffled, stuttered, 'Born devils! And you're the worst of the lot.'

'No, Ernie, no.' The old woman's glasses twinkled reassuringly at him. 'I had my dues, thank God, years ago.'

'Your dues!'

'Many a time, and I can't deny it,' said the old woman.

'Ah, devils born, I tell you,' groaned the presser.

'And the men! Dear lord!' Mrs Grainger shot at him. 'You can't even make your own trousers.'

Mr Sulky made a rude reply, and the women laughed quietly though they pretended not to. It made Johnny laugh, but at the same time he was ashamed to laugh — and he pretended not to. Once, a boy at school had told him a rude joke, and it was such a cunning comical joke that he had had to tell it in a whisper to his father. Father had giggled. 'Don't tell mother,' implored the boy. And father had said, 'Pooh, no. No fear!' But Johnny was sure that he had gone and told mother at once, and he could not bear to think of it.

There was no more joking after Mr Alabaster came in, for he was the master. Mr Alabaster had short bow legs, a pink face, and florid hair that curled dandily. So did his voice, for he lisped. Very cheerful he looked, and was seldom harsh to anyone. At the table opposite Mr Sulky he stood with a measuring tape around his shoulders, a pair of shears or a piece of pipeclay in his right hand; and having made chalk marks on whatever piece of cloth was before him, he cut trousers out of serge, flannel, duck, vicuna, tweed, any mortal cloth you could think of, all

day long. A very clever fellow. A thoughtful man, too. He would never allow Johnny Flynn to stay in the workshop during the dinner hour. Summer or winter, rain or shine, out he had to go.

'You muth get the fresh air into you,' Mr Alabaster said. 'Itth good for the lining of the stomach, or I shall have the poleeth on me. You can go under the railway arch if it rainth.'

No one but Mr Sulky had the privilege of staying in the workshop during dinner time: that was the edict, the injunction, the fixed rule. Then how was it that Mrs Smithers stayed there sometimes? Johnny would like to know. Mr Alabaster did not know of it, but Johnny knew and the women knew, what was more, although they never enjoyed that favour themselves, they were glad when Helen did. Johnny was glad, too, in a way, because of course her husband was a nasty cruel man who slogged her about, and it was best for her not to go home more often than she had to. Mrs Grainger used to advise her about Smithers.

'Give him in charge, my gal, turn him out, or sling your hook. He's a dirty foul thing, and the Lord gave him to you for a walking wickedness.'

'How can I do that?' asked Helen. 'I'm married to him, and there's little Hetty.'

'O, God's my mercy!' Mrs Grainger was baffled, but still emphatic. 'Give him in charge and sling your hook. What with the men and their women and the holy marriage bells, you can't tell your head from your elbow. It ought to be made impossible, and then there'd be some sense in Christianity.'

Well, the boy would go and walk in the streets. Unless it rained he avoided the railway arch because someone had done murder there, and someone else had painted a white skeleton on the wall; so he walked about.

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There was the dreadful den where the Jews brought their fowls to be strangled, knots of gabbling women dangling dead birds or birds that were going to be dead, the pavement dribbling blood, and feathers falling, sticking in the blood. And in the bakehouse next door you could watch a man flinging limp matzos, like pieces of white velvet, into a big oven, and another man drawing them out as stiff as china plates. Soon he opened his packages of food—wedges of bread and slips of meat folded in a sheet of newspaper. Scrupulously he sniffed the meat, and not caring for that smell he dropped the meat into a gutter and chewed the bread with resentment. Yesterday it was pickled pork, and the day before, it would be pickled pork tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. Whatever it was he had it for a week; six days it savoured, and did all that it was not expected to do. His aunt was a wise and busy woman who could not prepare a fresh meal for him every day; it was not to be thought of and it was not necessary. Every Saturday night she bought for his separate and sole consumption a little joint of meat, cooking it specially for him on Sundays; and every week his stomach turned sour on it after a day or two. The image of that evil ort of flesh reposing undiminishably in the larder tormented him even in dreams. It never entered his mind to complain to his aunt, and if it had done so he had little of the spirit of complaint. If he was not exactly a Spartan, he was, you might say; spartanatical. Things happened to you; they were good, or they were bad—and that was the truth about everything.

Now this neighbourhood was full of little Jew boys, and it was the custom of little Christians to submit such heathens to mockery, often to ill-treatment. In the early days there Johnny Flynn had called after some of them, 'Sheeny! Sheeny!' Sweet knowledge, how we live and learn! It was no joke to be the one pure Christian boy in

a street full of belligerent bloody-minded Hebrew serpents who pretended to run away when you made a face at them, but who, as soon as you pursued them, turned diabolically upon you and dashed your Christianity into discomfiture and blood. Perhaps it was these very misfortunes that made Johnny Flynn so fond of evangelical hymns. Whenever he experienced any joy — and that was not seldom — he would lift up his heart and sing to himself that he was

‘Sweeping through the gates of the New Jerusalem,
Washed in the blood of the Lamb.’

Or if it were sorrow that he felt — and that, too, was not seldom — he would murmur the

‘Sweetest carol ever sung:
Jesus, blessed Jesus.’

But maybe it was really an emotional gift from his mother. Always on Sunday eve she had taken him to an undenominational chapel run by some hooded sisters and a preacher with gaunt eyes who sometimes preached himself into a fit. At some stage of the service the sisters would come round and interrogate the worshipper.

‘Are you saved?’

‘Yes, ma’am, thank you,’ Mrs Flynn would reply.

‘Praise God. Is your little boy saved?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said mother, with bright hope in her eyes, ‘I *think* he is.’

‘Praise God, sister.’

But when the lady had passed on Johnny would bend and growl at his mother:

‘What d’you tell her that for?’

‘Well, you *must* be saved, Johnny, you know you must.’

‘I ain’t going to be,’ he would say wretchedly; ‘never, I won’t be.’

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'Now don't you be a bad boy, Johnny, or you'll go to the fire. Of course you must be saved, whatever next!'

Then, seeing him so cross, she would press his hand fondly and he would love her again, so that when they stood up to sing 'Sweeping through the gates' he would join in quite happily and admire her sweet voice.

Ah, in such matters he was on the side of his father. Father was an atheist, he had even joined the Skeleton Army—a club of men who went about in masks or black faces, with ribald placards and a brass band, to make war upon the Salvation Army. Yet when his father had died—twelve months ago—and a friend had made a small wooden cross, painted black, to put on his grave, Johnny had painted his name and dates on the cross in white paint with a thin brush that vexed him to madness, for the hair of the brush kept sticking out at the angle of the pressure applied and looked like an L. Moreover, Johnny had decided that his father should have an epitaph; so he cut up a piece of a cardboard box, gave it a border of black ink, composed a verse, and tacked the card to the cross with some little nails.

I am not gone I am only a sleep.
Where Jesus heavenly mansions
keep
Grieve not for long nor trouble be
And love each other because of me.
J. F.

He wept while he composed this piece of deathly poetry, and whenever he recalled it afterwards he wept again. His mother, too, liked it so very much that tears came into her eyes. In a few weeks rain had soaked the card on the

cross, the sun had bleached it and discoloured the ink so that it could hardly be read. When some of the tacks came out the card curled over and exposed an advertisement on its back of somebody's baking powder.

Long ere day was over the boy regretted his rash disposal of the meat, devastating hunger assailed him and he yearned for any scrap, even a dog's. At such times it was the joy of heaven to him if Mrs Grainger beckoned at tea-time.

'Johnny, I want you to go and get me a haporth of tea, a haporth of sugar and a farthingsworth of milk. There's threepence—you can have the farthing for yourself.'

Nice, nice old woman! With his farthing he would buy a few broken biscuits, and he would borrow a pinch of her sugar and dip his biscuits in her milk. That did not happen every day. At other times it was a desperate joy to stand in front of a grocer's window, to divide the display in half, and to ponder long and exquisitely which half he would take if a choice were given him. Would you have marmalade, potted tongue, cocoa, and condensed milk—things like that—or would you have pineapple, cornbeef and split-peas—candles being no good? Desperate schemes for obtaining any of these, or anything else eatable, simply assaulted his longing, but he had no courage to test them again after he had once stolen a salted gherkin that made him vomit. He would turn away and glare along the pavements and gutters, hoping to find an apple-core or a rotten orange. Once he had the odd chance to pick up a playing-card, which he tore into pieces. Mother had warned him against the sin of cardplaying; she had warned him against everything immoderate and immodest—strong drink, little girls, stealing, smoking, swearing, and such like. Yet whenever Mr Alabaster or Mr Sulky sent him out in the evening for a can of beer he could not resist

taking a stealthy gulp or two of the liquor. Hunger was awful. In a daze he soaped seams for Mr Sulky or sewed on buttons for Helen and Mrs Grainger. If there was nothing else to be done he had to go to the ragroom and sort clippings from that maddening pile. Kneeling down beside his box among the soft rags he would dream over the fine doings he had had on Queen Victoria's Jubilee day. That *was* a day! All the scholars went to school in the morning to pray, to implore God to confound and frustrate certain nameless nations, to receive a china mug with the Queen's face twice on it, a medal with her face again—in case the mug got broken—and a paper bag containing half a sausage-piece and a great piece of cake. Lord, how grand! He ate them all over again and again. Then you marched out to the park with flags, and the park was full—millions of kids. There were clowns and jokers and sports, and you had your mug filled with tea from a steam-roller. Hundreds of steam-rollers. And then he forgot everything and fell asleep sprawling amongst the rags until he was awakened by angry Mr Alabaster.

'Hi! hi! Thith won't do, you know. I don't pay you for thleeping, it will bankrupt me. It won't do at all. You and I muth part. God bleth, aren't you well?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, then! God bleth, do you think I am a millionaire with hundredth of pounds. I can't understhand you, and it won't do. You and I will part, my man.'

But at the end of the day the kind Mr Alabaster would sometimes give him a penny to ride part of the way home in a tram. With his penny Johnny hurried off to buy a cake or a pie, and thereafter walked cheerfully home. Often that penny became such a mighty necessity to him that as he knelt alone among the rags in the gloomy room, the pose, the quiet, and the need induced a mood in which he mumbled dozens of prayers.

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'O God, make him give me a penny tonight, only a penny; make him give me a penny, please God. Amen.'

As if to impregnate his plea with suitable flavour, he crooned over the hymns he knew. Then again, 'Please God, make him give me a penny. Please this once, like you did before, and I won't ask again. Amen.'

Not often were these prayers answered, and directly their failure became apparent he would descend weakly to the street, his whole body burning with ferocity against so frightful, so callous, so unseeing a god; and he would gasp out horrible blasphemies, until he came to a shop window where he could pause for a long rest, divide up its delicacies, and mystically devour them. In such delight he always forgot his anger against Jehovah.

One morning Helen came to the workroom at a very late hour. Mr Alabaster regarded her sternly as she came in, until he saw she had a black eye horribly bruised, and knew she had been crying. She whispered a few words to Mr Alabaster before going to her seat, and he lisped, 'O yeth, yeth. Dear me! Itth dreadful, yeth. Dear, dear me. All right.'

Mr Sulky did not utter a sound, not one terrible word, and the whole room became silent. After his first and only glance at the disfigured woman, Mr Sulky pounced upon his task with a fermenting malignity, the wrath of one whose soul had been split by a shock that drained him of charity and compunction, and his hot iron crashed upon the apparel before him as though it contained the body of a loathed enemy. Windows trembled at each mighty jar, implements on the table spitefully clattered, and paper patterns fluttered off the walls as if casting themselves to perdition. Mr Alabaster looked across protestingly.

'My word, Ernie! I thay!'

The presser ignored him. Snatching the iron from its stand, he flashed across the room, flung the cooling goose

into the heart of the fire, took another in its place, tested it with a spirt of saliva that ticked and slid into limbo, and resumed his murderous attack on the trousers

'Steady, Ernie! God bleth, you'll have the theiling down on uth!'

Mr Alabaster's pipeclay was jolted from the table by the next concussion. Mr Alabaster was master there, but he was a timid man; Sulky could eat three of him, and Sulky was a pearl amongst pressers, so Mr Alabaster put on his coat. If Sulky was going mad he could go mad in peace and comfort.

'Muth go up the town this morning Be back after dinner. Look after everything, Ernie. You know. Don't ... ah ... don't break anything, Ernie.'

The ignoring Mr Sulky signaled his master's departure by a volley of ferocious clouts upon the garments he was handling. Then he stopped. Although the sewing-machine whirled in its corner, the quietness of the women was perceptibly tense. Helen bent low over her work. Johnny knew that she was still crying, and he could not bear to see this, so he tiptoed from the workshop into the room across the passage and flung himself into the melancholy business of sorting the clippings. Canvas, buckram, silesia, cotton, silk, tweed, serge, flannel and vicuna, all fetched different prices in the rag market and had to be separated into heaps. The main heap was impregnable; it was a job that never could be finished, for the pieces always accumulated faster than the boy could sort them. It was a tide that ebbed lightly and flowed greatly, and the spirit of the boy was drowned in it. Once he had read a fairy tale about a prince in captivity who was given a barn full of canary seed to sort out in a single night or else he was to be turned into a donkey. But the prince had a fairy godmother who set some earwigs on the job, and they finished it while the prince went off to a ball and married a

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poor girl who was lovely and good and had cured the fairy godmother of toothache. But there were no fairy godmothers in Whitechapel, and earwigs were no use—not with cloth. And Johnny's head behaved strangely nowadays. Sometimes his head would go numb and he would feel as if he were falling out of his body and sinking into the void. Or if he only heard the ping of an omnibus bell in the city, even that gave him a horrible blow in his heart, and his heart would rattle madly. The sound of the bells was so shocking to him that when he went up to the city he always stuffed pieces of wadding in his ears. And the sight of the room full of rags affected him in much the same way: his head swam, his knees trembled, and his heart rocked.

Suddenly the door was dashed open and Mr Sulky appeared.

'O,' he said, seeing Johnny there. Then, 'Get out of this!'

The boy slunk out into the dark passage. Helen stood at the door; she held a handkerchief to her eyes.

'Come,' said Mr Sulky, and Helen followed him into the rag room. They did not fasten the door. Johnny lingered outside; he did not know what else to do, he was a stupid boy. Hearing nothing within the room and being somewhat bewildered, he pushed open the door. Helen and Mr Sulky were folded tightly in each other's arms, silent.

'Where shall I go?' the boy timidly whispered.

The presser turned his white face towards him and with his great teeth bared he snarled.

'Go away, you idiot!'

Out shot his foot and the door slammed in Johnny's face. The boy felt that his indiscretion had been vulgar. There was something in the surprising embrace of the two people—the figure of the piteous Helen and her tender cherishing by Mr Sulky—that seemed almost holy. He

crept back to the workroom where the women were talking aloud.

'Here, Johnny,' cried Mrs Grainger. 'Just run out and get me a pennyworth of pills at the post office. My consumption's so bad this morning, it's murdering me. Ask for them rhubarb pills. I don't suppose they'll do me any good—the only cure for me is a dose of poison; but God Almighty made the medicine, and I might be lucky. A pennyworth of rhubarb pills, Johnny. And tell that man with the crooked nose they're for a lady that's got a delicate stomach. Don't forget that, there's a good boy.'

When he returned from this errand of mercy Helen and Mr Sulky were back in the workshop again, looking as if nothing particular had occurred. Helen seemed cheerful. Mr Sulky whistled softly and did not bang his irons about very much.

This was one of the days on which silly Johnny had thrown his dinner away, and as time wore on the old hunger brought him to his old despair. At seven o'clock Mr Alabaster and Mr Sulky tossed up to see who should pay for supper, and Mr Sulky won—he always did. Johnny fetched them a small loaf, some cheese, a tin of lobster, and a can of beer. He tore off as much of the loaf's crust as he dared; if he could only have got at the lobster he would have gone to prison for it. He placed the food on the table.

'Good night, sir. Good night, Mr Sulky,' then he said, moving slowly towards the door. The two men were laughing and cracking jokes.

'Hi! Here, Johnny, hereth a penny for the tram!'

O my, it was very blissful then! Fatigue and despair left him; down the stairs he went leaping, and fled to a cookshop in Mile End Road. It was some distance away, but it was there you could buy such marvellous penny cakes, of a size, of a succulence, reeking with sweet fat and

crusted with raisins. Never a thought of the Lord, never a thanksgiving prayer. Johnny unwrapped the cake and stood gazing at it, seeking the loveliest corner of entry, when a large boy came to him from an alley near by and accosted him.

'Give us a bite, young 'un.'

'Gives nothing.' Master Flynn was positive to the point of heartlessness.

'I've had nothing to eat all day,' the large boy said mournfully.

Johnny intimated that he was in the same unfortunate case himself.

'Give us half of it, d'ye hear,' the other demanded in truculent tones, 'or I'll have the lot.'

Johnny shook his head and hiked a shoulder. 'No, you won't.'

'Who'd stop me?' growled the bandit.

'Inky,' replied young Flynn. And then, as he lifted the cake to his mouth and prepared to bite a great gap in it, the absolute and everlasting end of the world smote him clump on the ridge of his chin. He heard the rough fellow grunt, 'There's the upper cut for yer'; the cake was snatched from his paralysed grasp. 'And there's another for civility.' Again the end of the world crashed upon his face from the other side. Johnny felt no pain, not the faintest scruple of a physical twinge, but there was such a frantic roaring in his ears that he had to bend down with his head in his hands and stare abstractedly at the pavement. Scores of people were passing, but none seemed to have noticed this calamity; and when he looked up the fellow was gone, and the cake was gone. Dazed Johnny, after an interval for recovery, and after imprinting upon his mind the exact spot of the occurrence and the situation of that darksome alley, walked on grinding his teeth and registering a vow. He would train for a whole week on

puddings made of blood - and then! Arabs gave their horses cakes made with mutton fat and they would fly over the desert, mad, all day long; but for people it had to be blood - and then you could blind anyone. He'd get some blood, a lot.

The next day was cold, with a frozen mist niggling in the streets, and when Johnny returned from an afternoon journey to the city it was almost dark. As he ascended the stairs he could just discern the little girl Smithers sitting there.

'Hullo, Hetty,' he said; and she said, 'Mind where you're coming!' She was nursing a black kitten.

'Your mother ain't done yet, Hetty, not for hours.'

The child hugged her kitten more closely, making no reply.

'Why don't you go home?' Johnny asked.

The child looked up at him, as if wondering at his foolishness.

'Somebody 'ull kick you,' he went on, 'sitting down. What you sitting there for?'

A voice from the head of the stairs called 'Hoi!'

Johnny looked up. 'It's me,' he said.

Down came Mr Sulky. 'Is that Hetty?'

The child stood up and the man put an arm around her shoulders. 'Hallo, Hetty. Cold, aren't you? Want some tea?'

Hetty tucked the kitten under her arm and said, 'Yes,' very softly. So Mr Sulky put his hand in his pocket and jingled some money. Then he turned to Johnny. 'You want some tea?'

'No, not much,' lied the boy.

'Well, here's sixpence. Take Hetty out to some coffee-shop and give her a good tea, anything she likes, and have some yourself if you want any. Will you do that?'

'Yes,' said the boy.

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'There you are, Hetty,' Mr Sulky said, 'you go along of Johnny. He'll take you. And then come back here with him.' Bending down, Mr Sulky astonishingly kissed the child.

She and Johnny clattered down the stone stairs together and out into the street.

'You can't bring that kitten,' Johnny pointed out, 'not in a shop.'

'Why?' asked the little girl.

'They won't serve you, not in a shop.'

Dully the child answered: 'Yes, they will.'

'They'll laugh at you,' protested Johnny. 'They'll ... they'll cut its head off.'

'No, they won't,' Hetty said.

And in point of fact they did not, although the first thing they saw on entering the coffee-house was a man in a white apron sharpening a long thin knife—a very large man. They sat down in a compartment rather like a church pew, and the large man soon came up to them and tapped on their table with his ferocious knife.

'Well?' said he, very affably.

'Two cups of coffee, please, and two dorks, please,' young Flynn timidly ordered.

Soon the large man returned with these things.

'Two coffee, two slices,' he said, and pushed a basin of brown sugar towards them. Johnny thereupon gave him the sixpence, and the man gave him threepence change.

'It's nice in here, ain't it?' said Johnny. And indeed it was; warm and savoury, with the mingled odours of fish and bacon and the sawdust on the floor. Most of the other compartments had men in them, but they took no notice at all of the children or the kitten. Hetty dropped some spoonfuls of coffee into her saucer and stood the kitten on the table. It lapped a few drops and then sat upon its haunches to gaze at the ceiling.

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'Going to have some more coffee?' inquired the boy.

Hetty nodded her head and said 'You?'

'Na!' Johnny was contemptuous 'I don't want any more coffee. What else d'you want?'

'Jam turnover,' replied the child.

The boy made a wry face. 'You don't want that. Nothing in 'em,' he declared. 'If I was you I'd have a lump of Tottenham cake. Have some Tottenham cake?'

Hetty picked the kitten off the table. 'Ernie said I could have what I like.'

Johnny took her empty cup and walked off to the counter, returning with the cup refilled, a jam turnover, and a triangle of cake that had a pink bile-provoking veneer upon it. 'Tottenham,' said Johnny. They lingered on for some time until everything had disappeared, and Johnny had to explain to incredulous Hetty that all the money was gone.

'Where d'you live?' he asked her, and she replied that she lived in Bermondsey, that her father was a bottle-washer.

'I ain't got no father,' said Johnny Flynn dismally.

'He gets drunk every day,' continued Hetty.

'I ain't got no father at all,' repeated the boy, leaning his elbows on the table and looking mournful.

'And slashes mum,' said she.

'What for?' The boy was awed, but curious.

'He keeps on trying to kill us.'

'Yes, but what for?'

'I dunno,' said the little girl. 'Mum says he's gone into bad habits.'

'When my father got drunk,' Johnny Flynn expanded, 'he was grand.'

'And 'e's a noremonger,' Hetty added.

'What's that?'

'I dunno,' Hetty went on, stroking her kitten. 'I wish

we'd got another one; I don't like him More does mum.'

'But you can't have another father! Course you can't, silly,' commented Johnny Flynn.

'Yes, you can; and mum says we will, soon. We'll have to.'

Just then a quarrel arose in a compartment near them, between a man with a peg leg and a man with a patch over one eye. They were sitting opposite each other.

'You're a liar!' bawled the wooden-leg man.

'O! Am I!'

'Yes. There you are. Now you know. I don't care what company I'm in, or what company I ain't in, that's straight from my bloody heart.'

'I'm a liar, am I?' patch-eye shouted.

'Yes, there you are!'

'And there *you* are!' cried the other, and he walloped his accuser over the head with a jar of salt.

The large man in the white apron dropped his knife and rubbed his hands together, yelling: 'Hi! Drop it. Devil and hell, where d'ye think you are—in the bull ring?'

And he hurled himself competently upon the brawlers.

'Drop it, d'ye hear! Or I'll have the guts out of you for my garters. Drop it!'

Both combatants subsided into their benches.

'D'ye see where he hit me?' said the peg-leg man, pointing with his finger to a spot on his head. 'Feel that!'

The fat host plunged his fingers amongst the greying hair. 'Jesus wept!' he murmured 'There's a lump like St Paul's Cathedral. I'm surprised at you, Patchy.'

'Called me a liar,' the aggressor explained callously.

'Pooh, that's only his ignorance!'

'Ignorance!' moaned the afflicted one 'He's broken my brainpan. That's done me a lot of good, ain't it?'

'O, it's just his playful heart, that's all! Now behave yourselves,' the host went on, with emollient raillery,

'... or! You know what I'll do to you—ha, ha! you know that, don't you? I'm the king of the castle here, and an Englishman's castle's his birthright all the world over. A king can do no wrong.'

'Why not?'

'It's just a law, like everything else,' mine host explained, 'but of course it's kept private.'

'O,' said the one-eyed man resignedly, 'give him another cup of cawfee!'

During this tumult Hetty trembled fearfully, and at last Johnny had to usher her out of the place.

'I don't like these dark streets,' said she, clutching Johnny's hand and tucking the kitten under her arm.

'That's nothing,' Master Flynn assured her. 'I like fighting. Don't you like fighting? I had a scrap with a bloke last night in the Mile End Road, and I split his head open in six places. Do you know what Peter Jackson does when he trains himself? He's the champion of the world, he is.'

Miss Smithers did not know.

'He drinks blood,' Johnny informed her.

When they approached the workshop they met Hetty's mother standing in the doorway at the foot of the stairs, so Johnny told her of the grand tea they had had. And while he was also telling her about the quarrel Mr Sulky came tripping down the stairs.

'Hallo!' he cried, greeting them, as if he had just met them for the first time. 'Here we are then. This way, Nell. Good night, Johnny. Come on, Hetty.' And before Johnny could explain how he had spent the whole sixpence Mr Sulky took Helen's arm and Hetty's hand, and the three of them walked off together. And Johnny heard Hetty exclaiming;

'Mum! Look at the dear little kitten!'

Johnny never saw Helen again. Apparently she had gone away, and she would be happier now. At the end of

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the week the women had a 'whip round' and collected a small sum of money to buy Mr Sulky a teapot. He was setting up housekeeping—Mrs Grainger said And when she gave him the teapot she said God bless him, and wished him the best of luck.

In a little while Johnny's tribulation came to a happy end. His mother wrote that she could not bear to be parted from him any longer; he had been away a year; he must come home to her now. His aunt was deeply annoyed at such ingratitude and wanted him to refuse to go home; but Johnny gave his notice in to Mr Alabaster, who said he was very sorry to part with him, and declared that he 'wath the beth boy he ever had'. When the joyous last day came Mr Alabaster wished him goodbye and gave him some good advice. Mr Sulky did the same and presented him with sixpence as well.

'Goodbye, little Johnny,' whispered old Mrs Grainger—and she gave him two new pennies. Johnny kept them sacredly in a box for many a long day.